

VZCZCXRO4520
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #1795/01 3591054
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 241054Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3849
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 1366
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM 4579
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3308
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001795

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/24/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: UNSCOL WILLIAMS ON ISRAELI INTENT TO
RESOLVE GHAJAR

REF: A. BEIRUT 1793
[B](#). BEIRUT 1782
[C](#). BEIRUT 1780

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#). (C) Returning from Israel December 23, UN Special Coordinator on Lebanon (UNSCOL) Michael Williams relayed to the Ambassador that Israel demonstrated a "serious intent" to complete negotiations over the transfer of northern Ghajar to Lebanon. He noted a "genuine commitment" on the part of Israeli PM Olmert to complete a deal, but cautioned there could be problems satisfying northern Ghajar residents' concerns about abandoning their property, should an agreement require them to resettle. Williams, noting Lebanese PM Siniora's reaction when told of positive Israeli views, expressed relief that Siniora has remained patient with the slow process. Williams stressed though, that closure on Ghajar would take more time. Nevertheless, he said, his visit had confirmed the resolve the Israelis to move forward. On Gaza, Williams warned, the Israelis are concerned that another rocket launched by Hamas or confrontation could incite a larger and more lethal response. Williams assessed the Turkish-mediated, Syrian-Israeli indirect negotiations as producing more talk than substance to date. End summary

THE HOUR HAS COME OVER GHAJAR

[2](#). (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolMilOff, met UNSCOL Special Coordinator Michael Williams and UNSCOL Poloffs Salvatore Padulla and Diego Zorilla at the UNSCOL headquarters December 23 afternoon. Williams considered his December 21-23 trip to Israel a success. He relayed that in a meeting with PM Siniora immediately upon his return to Beirut, Siniora had expressed a degree of surprise over the Israeli response to continuing the Ghajar negotiations, despite Siniora's earlier frustrations over Israeli behavior (Ref A). Siniora has repeatedly noted the importance of resolving the Ghajar issue to weaken Hizballah's claims and to strengthen the GOL. Williams also noted that UNIFIL Commander General Claudio Graziano had flown to Beirut from the UNIFIL base in Naqoura to visit Siniora that morning to offer encouragement to continue the Ghajar process and to

report on the Blida incident, in which two Lebanese olive grower brothers had been temporarily detained by the IDF. Graziano has used the Blida incident to emphasize the need to define the Blue Line and to rely on UNIFIL. Significantly, the Israelis told Williams that they would welcome a joint visit by Williams and Gen. Graziano January 11-12.

13. (C) Williams told the Ambassador that he believes Olmert was displaying real commitment to resolving the issue, and that Olmert might sense the "hour has come" to move in a positive fashion. Referring to a comment over Ghajar attributed to Turkish PM Tayyip Erdogan, Williams said Erdogan had declared the Israelis should "get out of the mess (Ghajar) as it will only improve their security." Williams also noted the need for the UN to point to any progress on Ghajar in time for the next UNSCR 1701 report to the Security Council on February 28.

LIVNI'S MFA MORE CAUTIOUS ON TIMING OF GHAJAR OUTCOME

14. (C) Williams also met with Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs Director General Arron Abramovich and Policy Advisor Tal Becker who expressed support for the negotiations. MFA officials in general, however, were more cautious with their backing of a turnover of north Ghajar, reflecting Foreign Minister Livni's attitude, he said. Livni expresses more of a technical approach to the negotiations, he discerned, although she has assembled several advisors on the issue to evaluate legal and humanitarian aspects. In contrast to Olmert, Williams remarked that MFA officials continued to

BEIRUT 00001795 002 OF 003

believe any decision on Ghajar before the February 10 Israeli elections was unrealistic.

THEY'RE SQUATTERS, GIVE THEM COMPENSATION

15. (C) Williams stressed that those north Ghajar residents -- Israeli citizens on Lebanese territory -- demanding to remain or receive compensation from the Israeli government if they must abandon their homes, remained problematic. Williams asserted the residents complain they are "left out of" the negotiation process, and said they were likely to make a legal appeal to the Israeli Supreme Court over the right to remain or be compensated. Even though considered "squatters" on the land, the residents' twenty-year presence in north Ghajar compels them to fight to retain their property, Williams emphasized. He warned there was a "distinct possibility" the legal case could reach the Supreme Court. However, he continued, Israeli history has little precedent for such claims; compensation will be the recourse, he believed. Padulla added, "there is a certain ambiguity" in the demands to remain in north Ghajar. Some residents are very upset over a divided Ghajar, while others are not, he remarked. At this point, however, there has been no change in the key elements of the Northern Ghajar concept paper drafted six months ago, said Williams. Also, the Israelis had noticed, said Williams, that Lebanese President Sleiman had seemed to display a "bit more of an open mind" on these issues than did PM Siniora.

GAZA-A TIPPING POINT AHEAD?

16. (C) Williams cautioned that the recent breakdown of the Hamas-Israeli cease-fire in Gaza could lead to escalated fighting. Without offering much elaboration, Williams said the Israelis were concerned it would not take much to "tip the situation" towards a more dangerous confrontation, and an escalation might have regional implications. Williams used the term "incursion" into Gaza, when assessing possible Israeli responses to more rockets targeted at urban centers. He noted FM Livni is scheduled to travel to Egypt to meet President Mubarak December 25, and expressed some hope the

situation will not become enflamed.

THE RUSH TO DAMASCUS

7.(C) Williams stated he met with both Israeli Prime Minister's office advisors and Foreign Ministry officials over Ghajar, but only the PMO addressed relations with Syria, he said. Williams mused why Olmert appeared keen to gain better relations with Syria or possibly conclude a peace treaty with it before he leaves office in six weeks. A peace treaty developing soon is "out of the question," Williams insisted, and questioned whether Olmert thought he might believe he could stay in office longer with some sort of treaty. "He may truly be concerned about his legacy as Prime Minister," Williams opined. Williams emphasized, despite Olmert's "zeal," there was not much to show politically after four rounds of Turkish-mediated, indirect talks between Israel and Syria. (Note: Olmert traveled to Ankara December 22-23, meeting Erdogan to discuss progress on the indirect talks. End Note.) Williams observed that Olmert and the MFA are in "different realms" concerning their approach to indirect talks with Syria. He assessed that similar to Ghajar, Olmert wanted to conclude something substantive with Syria soon, but Livni and the MFA were much more cautious over any results coming from the ongoing talks. Also, the Israelis had asked why President Asad had chosen to speak publicly December 22 about his desire to conduct direct peace talks with Israel. This would cause both Hizballah and Iran some unhappiness, Williams speculated.

COMMENT

18. (C) Williams' tempered but fairly positive outlook on moving the Ghajar issue forward is welcome news. PM Siniora

BEIRUT 00001795 003 OF 003

has told us repeatedly of his frustration over Ghajar over the past few months. The report from Williams should serve to release some pressure on Siniora to show results for his more restrained approach towards the Israelis.

19. (C) Meanwhile, a number of Lebanese leaders has spoken out publicly this week on the idea of talks with Israel. Parliamentary Majority leader Saad Hariri said December 23 that direct negotiations between Lebanon and Israel were against national interests. Hariri also criticized Syria's President Bashar Asad for his willingness to demarcate borders with Israel in the occupied Golan Heights while refusing to do so with Lebanon in the occupied Sheba'a Farms. Hizballah Labor Minister Mohammed Fneish said after meeting Siniora December 23 that direct talks with Israel were "unacceptable and unlikely to be achieved." For his part, Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun announced that he did not object to direct negotiations between Lebanon and Israel if Syria was "at the same table." End comment.

SISON